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DANGEROUS TRADE ROUTES: ON THE PLUNDERING OF CARAVANS IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC NEAR EAST

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A caravan is defined as a company of travellers, such as merchants and pilgrims, on a journey through a desert, unsettled regions or hostile land. Usually they are banded together for mutual protection.

We know that caravans were used for trade from at least the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC up to the 19th century, and it is interesting that the organisation and the function of caravans hardly changed at all during the last three thousand years of its history. This can be seen, for instance, in the fact that caravans were composed of camels, donkeys, mules and horses throughout their history.

There is no accurate data about caravans and caravan trade before the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. In general, however, information may be gained primarily from cuneiform sources, and from other groups of Semitic epigraphy such as South Arabian and Palmyrene inscriptions. Classical authors and Arabic sources also provide some data on this subject.

The object of this paper is to present some problems which confronted caravans on their journeys, particularly attacks and plundering. After a brief discussion of the organisation of caravans, this paper will provide a few examples of attacks and raids on caravans in the Near East from the 2nd millennium BC, the 1st millennium BC, and also from pre-Islamic Arabia. It is not the purpose of this paper to study the caravan routes in the ancient Near East, which has been the subject of study by several scholars (Potts 1988; Dorsey 1991; Beitzel 1992; Graf et al. 1992; Astour 1995).

I. The Organisation of the Caravans and Measures taken for their Security

Written sources give us some information about the organisation of caravans in the ancient Near East. In addition to some data from the Old Assyrian period, we have information from other Akkadian sources. The clearest evidence of long-distance trade in the early 2nd millennium, from approximately 1950 BC, comes from the Anatolian site Kanish, in modern times the city of Kultepe. Assyrian merchants founded a colony in this city, and thousands of clay tablets from its business archives record the trade between it and Assur.

These documents deal not only with debts and the arrangement of various matters such as the fixing of prices and the means of financing the caravans, but they also tell us about the way in which the trade caravans, which in this case were composed of pack-asses, were organised in general (Larsen 1976: 85-105). The caravans brought tin and textiles from Assur to Cappadocia and carried metal supplies, especially copper, back to Assur. This trade-system was well organised, and was dominated by a number of commercial families from Assur who posted agents in their colonies in Asia Minor. These merchants were also organised in a kind of association (*wabartum*). The documents also mention something called the *kāru* (CAD K: 231ff.), which is described by A.L. Oppenheim as a "merchant organisation with a seat and a legal status of its own, outside the city proper" (Oppenheim 1977: 91; cf. also Larsen 1976: 230-236).

No concrete information about the organisation of camel caravans in pre-Islamic Arabia is given by the pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions. Some data, however, can be gleaned from the Classical sources and from the Arabic Classical sources (Groom 1981). Furthermore, we find quite a bit of good information about the organisation of caravans in the Palmyrene inscriptions (1st century BC until 3rd century AD). This study will take into account the important data from Palmyra, because it is fundamental to the study of the continuation of ancient oriental traditions in organising the caravans. Considerable data about the Nabataean caravans is also available. For all that, the best information about caravans comes from the Old Assyrian documents and the Amarna Letters from the 2nd millennium BC.

In spite of the domestication of the camel in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC and the use of the camel as a draught animal in caravans as well as in military actions, the caravans of the Late Bronze age were still primarily composed of asses (Zarins 1992).

No accurate studies about the organisation of the oriental caravan are avaible which focus upon its history and development (Weisse 1924; Edzard/-Ephʿal 1980; Orhonlu 1978). Nevertheless, in addition to some other general studies, there are specific works dealing with particular periods, such as studies examining the Old Assyrian caravans (Larsen 1976) or the Palmyrene caravans (Drexhage 1988). Research examining the Palmyrene caravans should be conducted in the context and in light of the ancient Near East caravan trade in general. At the same time, any study concerning pre-Islamic caravans should take not only the Sabaean but also the Nabataean and Palmyrene caravan trade into account.

The organisation of a caravan demanded very detailed arrangements. Every caravan needed a master or a leader. This person was usually one of the merchants who had long years of experience with various trade routes. He had to know them and their suitable way stations or caravanserai like the back of his

hand, and he also had to know where water and wells were located. It was his responsibility to make all the decisions concerning the caravan. He made all the arrangements for its organisation, he decided when the march of the caravan should start, and he also determined the route the caravan was to follow. Above all, the leader was responsible for the general security of the caravan, which is the main aspect upon which this paper will focus later.

Every caravan also needed a guide. Unfortunately the sources do not give accurate data about the role of guides, which was significant in the desert and especially on the long-distance roads. Such guides surely accompanied travelling caravans on the incense-route between Yemen and the Mediterranean. Ancient Arabs (*Aribi*), the people of the Syro-Arabian desert of the 1st millennium BC, played a major role in the caravan trade as guides, and later the Nabataeans became guides on the routes of this region. The Arabic sources mention some of these guides by name (ʿAlī 1978: vol. 7, 323). Guides were also necessary for military campaigns. Arabs of the Sinai served as guides for the Persian king Cambyses (529-522 BC) when he conquered Egypt (Herodotus III, 4, 9), and the Nabataean military leader Syllaeus was the guide of the Roman leader Aelius Gallus in his military campaign against Arabia Felix (Strabo XVI, 4, 23).

How large was a caravan in the ancient Near East? Unfortunately we are unable to say for certain, since there is no concrete information about sizes. Nevertheless, we are able to make fairly accurate estimates. Sumerian donkey caravans from the 3rd millennium BC were composed of about 200 donkeys (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 416). It is worthy of note that one Egyptian prince, Harkhuf, who made trips to the Sudan, mentioned that in one of his journeys he had a caravan of 300 donkeys (Casson 1979: 28). Donkey caravans in the Old Assyrian period were composed of about 200 donkeys (Saggs 1962: 278). There is no information about the first camel caravans in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC, but in the first half of the 1st millennium BC camel caravans were composed of at least 200 camels, as we know from a Sabaean caravan mentioned in the Assyrian sources. It may be assumed that the largest size of a caravan ever mentioned in the sources of the 2nd millennium BC is that which appears in a letter from Mari. It mentions a caravan of the Haneans, a Bedouin tribe, composed of 3000 donkeys and loaded with wool and grain in Upper Mesopotamia (Dalley 1984: 174; Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 416). Donkeys continued to be used in camel caravans as did mules, and horsemen served as escorts of the caravans. The leader of the caravan usually rode a horse. Large caravans in ancient Mesopotamia were apparently equipped with chariots, which would seen to have been drawn by mules (Saggs 1962: 278).

How large Nabataean caravans were is likewise difficult to say. Strabo described a Nabataean caravan as being as big as "an army" (Strabo XVI, 4, 23). At the advent of Islam, a camel caravan was composed of at least 1000

camels. The Islamic historian Ṭabari mentions that a Meccan caravan in the time of the prophet Muḥammad was composed of 2500 camels. It is worth noting that this caravan was escorted by one hundred men (Ṭabarī II, 407). In the Islamic period such a number was considered a large caravan, while a caravan of 1000 was considered to be small (Orhonlu 1978: 677). No accurate data about the size of caravans is available in the Old Testament. Isaiah referred to caravans of camels and donkeys (Isaiah 21: 7).

The organisation of a caravan followed a long list of arrangements, starting with the preparation of the goods which had to be transported. The animals then had to be collected and provisions had to be made for their feeding. Caravan personnel, usually with a great deal of experience, had to be organised and a specific direction or itinerary for the caravan needed to be determined. After all that, the most important requirements for the organisation of a caravan may be described as follows:

1. The organisers had to decide on water sources such as water wells, halting stations, and shelters where the caravan could rest and obtain provisions and feed for the animals (Dorsey 1991: 43ff.). Caravanserais had already been established by the 2nd millennium BC. Some data regarding the caravans, such as their supplies on the way, is available (Veenhof 1972: 418f.). A letter from Mari informs us about the way in which a caravan had to be supplied with provisions to continue its journey (ARM I, 66; Klengel 1996: 160).

2. The appropriate season for the start of the journey had to be determined according to regional weather conditions, and a fixed day for the start of the journey had to be set. Assyrian merchants tried to avoid the summer heat and the cold winter, and the Assur-Kanish journey had to take these seasonal conditions into account (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 415). The crossing of long distances, and especially of desert roads, was impossible before camels came to be used in caravans in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. We have two good examples of the seasonal departure of a caravan from pre-Islamic Mecca, namely the two journeys mentioned in the Qur'ān (Sura 106: 2; Crone 1987: 120), the winter caravan to Yemen and the summer caravan to Syria-Palestine (Bilād aš-Šām).

3. The organisation of a caravan also required a degree of security. It is important to note that the caravan trade was regarded as a venture. Thus, the most critical aspect connected with the organisation of a caravan was planning for its safety and taking measures to secure the caravan route. The basic idea of a caravan in itself as a group of travellers or traders joining together in a journey, and not as individuals, is a reflection of their sense of insecurity. Travelling as a unit allowed them to defend themselves in the event of an attack.

Some scholars maintain that organising a caravan was not much different from the organisation of a military campaign (Haldar 1971: 78). This can be

seen in the fact that caravans in general were accompanied by armed guards. Furthermore, the majority of terms referring to caravans in the Semitic languages derive primarily from a root which means "to go, to travel". There are some designations, however, which have the meaning "expedition", which can refer either to military or to trade expeditions. The Akkadian words *ḫarrānu* and *girru* are examples (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 414f.). Among the several Arabic terms for caravan, the word *qāfila* is of importance. It means "the one which comes back safely". Some of these terms give an indication of the internal organisation of a caravan and an idea of its function.

Caravan routes were usually protected by the military and political powers of the state in which they were located. The state made energetic efforts, both diplomatic and military, to secure the control of its territory. Diplomatic measures included attempts to control the trade roads and caravan stations by signing political accords with the local kings or rulers. This was practised by several states and kings in the ancient Near East, Assyria for instance (Larsen 1976: 229; Postgate 1992: 200f.). One good example of agreements which regulated the safety of the trade is the *īlāf*-agreement of the Quraiš with other tribes with whom they had contact. Its purpose was to secure the caravans of Mecca (Crone 1987: 109f.; Simon 1989: 59ff.).

One of the most important functions of the state in the ancient world, however, was the building of roads, primarily for military reasons, which usually also became the roads used by caravans and messengers. Indeed, caravan routes did not change throughout their history.

Political stability was immensely important for the caravan trade. In times of war or political instability, communication by way of overland roads was in danger, and the risk of attacks by Bedouins as well as by political governors and other rulers was correspondingly much greater. Yet, since the trade and military routes seem to have coincided in the ancient Near East, which implies that military stations were most certainly to be found along these routes, the travelling caravans could be more-or-less assured of protection. There are many examples of attempts by the state to control the caravan routes in the pre-Islamic Near East, and this section will present a few of them in order to shed light upon the kind of steps which were taken.

The Akkadian king Sargon (2334-2279 BC), for example, claimed that he had conducted his military campaign in the Amanus mountains and in Syria in order to protect the rights of the Akkadian merchants (Hallo 1971: 56). Assyrian expansion in Syria-Palestine and into other parts of the ancient Near East was at least in part a result of the Assyrian attempt to dominate the caravan routes and to make them safe for travel (Saggs 1962: 98f., 110f.). The Assyrian military campaigns against the Arabs (*Aribi*) are a good example of this (Ephʿal 1982: 116-25). The Sabaeans were compelled to send unofficial payments to Assur in the form of gifts as a sign of their acceptance of the domi-

nation of the Assyrians who controlled the upper part of the incense-route. The New Babylonian kings embarked upon military expeditions to secure trade routes in Syria. A good example of such politics is to be seen in the actions of the last king of the Neo-Babylonian period, Nabonidus (555-539 BC), who left Babylon and resided in Taymāʾ for ten years. Most scholars see this sojourn of Nabonidus as an attempt to control the Arabian caravan trade route, especially since this king established trade stations between Taymāʾ and Yathrib (later Medina) (Beaulieu 1989: 178-85).

At the same time, there is no doubt that controlling the trade routes was often a cause of war in the ancient Near East, since trade was fundamental to the economy of the states in this area. One of the most important reasons for war between the South Arabian states of Saba, Hadhramaut, Qataban and Maʿin was the monopoly of the caravan roads. However, South Arabia was involved in the international trade of frankincense, myrrh and other aromata, and it was able to monopolise trade routes to Egypt, Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia from the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. Arabian caravans came back not only with goods from Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine, but also with cultural influence (Liverani 1992: 111ff.). The trans-Arabia caravan route (Potts 1988: 127-162) continued to function for a long time, until the political power of the South Arabian states declined. Along the spice road in Central and North Arabia, several political units, whose function was to guarantee the security of the caravans, were established. This road was one of the most important roads of the ancient world.

In order to guarantee its own security, it was necessary for the caravan to pay taxes to countries through which it passed. It had to pay not only the local kings and rulers, but also the Bedouin tribes. For the Bedouin sheikhs, it was a privilege to achieve control over caravan routes. This was always a guarantee against the attacks of Bedouin bandits. The sheikhs gave assurances that they would pay compensation in the event that the caravans were raided. We know that goods intended as payment to Bedouin tribes in the form of spices and precious stones constituted at least part of the goods carried by the caravans. This explains the tributes in the form of spices and precious stones which Arab (*Aribi*) groups paid to the Assyrians (Ephʿal 1982: 90f.). Local kings of Syria-Palestine, and even the Sabaean kings, sent gifts to the Assyrian king. These gifts, which could also be understood as tributes, symbolised both friendship and loyalty.

In general, the caravans avoided hostile regions. Sometimes they tried to avoid settled areas and cities in order not to pay taxes to local authorities. This was practised for the most part, however, when there were many sheikhs or local kings on the road, which would mean that the caravan would have had to pay taxes to each of these. It is important to note that such detours were only possible after camels began to be used in caravans. We therefore assume that

caravans travelling from Arabia to Syria and Mesopotamia often used the route of Wadi Sirḥān rather than the King Highway which ran through Transjordan. Although the latter was certainly more secure, its use would have meant the payment of more taxes. In any case, the Wadi Sirḥān was an important trade route in the 1st millennium BC, especially in the Neo-Assyrian period. This Wadi formed the centre of the Arab area (*Aribi*). The region's metropolis was Dūmat al-Ǧandal (*Adummatu* in the cuneiform sources and the Biblical *Dūma*), which was not only an important caravan station, but also a gate to Syria and Upper Mesopotamia, and especially to Assur. It seems that the Assyrians wanted to establish direct contacts with Arabia by controlling Dūmat al-Ǧandal. This was the most probable reason for the military campaign of Assurbanipal (668-627 BC) against this city (Ephʿal 1982: 116-125). Another reason seems to have been the attempt to control the trade route from Dūmat al-Ǧandal which ran east towards Babylon. The trade route of Wadi Sirḥān was strictly organised in the Nabataean and Roman periods (al-Muaikel 1994: 49-66). Caravan stations were established alongside this Wadi, water wells were dug, and the security of caravans was guaranteed. There is another place which was used by caravans to avoid paying taxes: Wadi Tharthar, which is in Upper Mesopotamia (Dalley 1984: 25).

Once the caravan system in the ancient Near East had been developed to some extent, many nomadic tribes became involved in the trade. Many of them abandoned their way of life as robbers in the desert, as well as their razzia activities against caravans, and became good merchants. Caravan trade was thus vital not just for the development of the state economies in the ancient Near East, but also for the transformation of societies there, especially those along the incense road. In addition, some tribes specialised in raising donkeys in the Old Assyrian period because donkeys were required for caravans at that time (Postgate 1992: 166). There were also Arab tribes (*Aribi*) which specialised in camel raising as well. The Assyrian king Assurbanipal (668-627 BC) maintained that, after his military campaign against the Arabs (*Aribi*), the price of a camel fell to less than 1 shekel (ANET, 299). In actual fact the price of a camel in the Sargonid dynasty was half a shekel (Contenau 1954: 64). The breeding of camels and donkeys continued later around the caravan cities in the Hellenistic and the Roman periods, being found at places such a Bosra and Wadi Hauran near Hīt on the Euphrates. Wadi Hauran loomed large in the breeding camels of for Palmyra (Gawlikowski 1994: 31). Nevertheless, nomadic tribes continued to be the most dangerous group, and they posed a permanent threat not only to the urban areas but also to the caravans. Caravans were in constant danger of Bedouin raids when they passed through the desert area. A good example of this in modern times is payment made by the Ottoman Sultan to Bedouins in Transjordan in the 19th century. The Sultan was obliged to pay a tax called

the *ṣurra* to these tribes to secure the pilgrimage caravan from Damascus to the Ḫiğāz.

In spite of the measures taken to ensure the security of the caravans, attacks and the plundering of caravans, as well as the killings of merchants, occurred frequently. We have good examples of such acts recorded in cuneiform sources, in South Arabian inscriptions, and in the Arabic sources. Some examples will be presented here.

II. The Anxiety for the Safety of Caravans as Reflected in Literature and Religion

The fact that the security of the caravans was an everyday worry for the people of the ancient Near East is reflected in the literature of the ancient Near East, including hymns and prayers (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 421). The following Akkadian example is interesting: "O Šamaš, the caravan (*alaktu*) which passed along a road of terror addresses you" (CAD A: 299).

There is an incantation found in the Old Assyrian trade colony Kultepe (Kanish) which gives some insight into the troubles which faced the caravans. It states: "A black dog crouches on the hill, waiting for the scattered caravan. His eyes watch for a good man" (Larsen 1976: 93).

Anxiety is also reflected in the religion of the people of this region, and several deities appear to have had the function of protecting the caravans in addition to their other well-known functions. The god Šamaš in Mesopotamia is a good example of this. In addition to his main function as a god of justice, he was also responsible for the safety of the caravans. There were also deities who were primarily associated with the caravans, such the Minaean god Wadd. Ḏū Samūwī was the main god of the North Arabian tribe Amīr, which was involved in trade and is known from South Arabian inscriptions (Höfner 1965: 527f., 549f.). The symbol of this deity was the camel. Moreover, the Nabataean god Šaiʿ al-Qaum was the caravan god of this people (Knauf 1990: 176-181). It seems that this god was originally a North Arabian tribal god. This is suggested primarily by his name, Šaiʿ al-Qaum, which means "protector of the tribe". Likewise, Arṣū and ʿAzīzū were the caravan deities of Palmyra (Rostovtzeff 1932a; Teixidor 1979: 68-71). The Palmyrene people believed that their travelling caravans in the desert were protected by the jinn (*gnyʾ*). The latter were, however, a lowly class of deities in Palmyra (Teixidor 1979: 78). The Lihyanite god Abū Īlāf was apparently also a caravan deity (Caskel 1954: 46).

It is interesting to note that the caravan trade of Mecca developed in association with the Kaʿba (Crone 1987: 168ff.). It was the custom of the caravaneers of Mecca to visit the Kaʿba and receive the blessing of their deities

before starting out on the journey. They used to do the same when they returned, first visiting the Kaʿba and thanking the deities for their safe return. Job spoke of waylaying caravans passing through hostile country. He mentioned caravans of Taymāʾ and Saba (Job 6: 19).

Another indication of the importance of the security of caravans is revealed in private Akkadian letters and correspondence, which also give us some information about how worried people were as to whether a caravan or the merchant arrived safely in their place of destination or not. The letters which take the form of a message, or which give brief information about caravans such as "The journey is dangerous", "The servants of PN arrived from GN, their caravan is safe" (CAD G: 91), "My caravan (*ḫarrānu*) is late" (CAD Ḫ: 111), and several other such notes, are of particular interest. In a Neo-Babylonian letter, this is stated as follows: "The caravan of Bīt-Dakkūri now has come. Whatever you [desire], write to me, and I will buy and send (it) to you"(Cole 1996: no. 51, 4-9). Bīt Dakkūri is an Aramaean/Chaldean tribe which settled in south Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamia it was customary, as part of the set of measures taken to ensure security, to check for omens before beginning a journey or an expedition.

III. The Plundering of Caravans in the 2nd Millennium

Caravan trade between Assur and its colonies in Asia Minor was established at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC and was highly organised. The measures taken for the safety of the caravans included the establishment of outposts where provisions could be obtained. Colonies were founded, and trade institutions such as *kāru* were governed and protected by agreements with the local kings of the area. Such actions show that the caravans were sometimes confronted by danger, and that it was necessary to prevent raids (Larsen 1976: 93ff.; Postgate 1992: 211ff.). Occasionally, the Assyrians arranged for the protection of caravans by means of gifts and custom duties. Several scholars maintain, however, that the measures which were taken were more substantial and that this route was secure in general (Haldar 1971: 78). Very little is recorded about attacks on caravans on this road, and this is taken as an indication of its security. There is information, however, about a caravan lost in the mountains (Larsen 1976: 93). It is to be noted that the caravan routes of Asia Minor were well known to Assyrian traders, and that the traders were also aware of smuggler roads (Veenhof 1972: 305ff.; Klengel 1979: 123-128; Dalley 1984: 171). The presence of smugglers on the Assyrian border is recorded, for instance, in the Neo-Assyrian period (Lanfranchi/Parpola 1990: no. 100).

Apart from being personally involved in the caravan trade, kings were usually also responsible for the security of the caravans. Their standing armies

were always ready to move or to make the trade routes secure. We also have evidence that caravans needed a king's permission to enter his country or his territory. One document records a king allowing a caravan to enter his land (Dalley 1984: 174; Postgate 1992: 215). The leaders of caravans were always received by kings in their palaces (Dalley 1984: 172). The kings also complied with the merchants' requests and looked after the interests, which suggests that merchants had high social standing in the societies of the ancient Near East.

We find some information about the dangers facing a caravan in a letter from Mari. Yasmakh-Adad, the governor of Mari and the son of the Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad I (1813-1781 BC), wrote to Hammurabi, king of Babylon, describing the conditions as follows:

"A little while ago your 'brother' (Ishme-Dagan) sent a caravan to Tilmun (Bahrain). Then that caravan set out homewards, but was detained by Ili-epuch in a dispute over a well. Now, I have sent X and Imgurrum: they are to escort that caravan to Babylon to you. Let that caravan be detained with you until your 'brother' writes to you to say that it may depart. Your 'brother' is well, and the city Ekallatum is well; I am well and the city of Mari is well" (ARM V, 14; after Dalley 1984: 173).

In addition to the Old Assyrian texts from Kanish (Kultepe), the Mari texts give us substantial information about caravan trade and international trade relations (Klengel 1979: 75-82). The state of Mari apparently had solid control of the caravan routes of its area. This is evidenced by the outposts (*bazaḫātu*, CAD B: 184) which were established along these roads (Dalley 1984: 175). Envoys were usually accompanied by escorts when they travelled within this kingdom. When any of the caravans encountered problems, military escorts were immediately sent to save them (Dalley 1984: 171, 175). Moreover, merchants were given royal protection and traders enjoyed a diplomatic status of sorts (Oppenheim 1977: 92f.). There were contracts between kings and states arranging for the security of caravans and merchants. There are also some legal texts concerning the security of merchants in the ancient Near East in Hittite and Hebrew (Saggs 1962: 279). One letter from Mari records an attack on a caravan as follows:

"Ili-iddinam, my lord's envoy, whom my lord sent to Elahut, and Tulish his escort from Elahut, the 10 donkeys who were carrying white cedar wood and the one horse that they were bringing – between the towns of A and B those men were raided. They killed Ili-iddinam, his 4 men servants, and the 2 Haneans who were with him, and Tulish the man from Elahut together with his 5 men servants and his servant girl. They carried off the 10 donkeys and the one horse that they were bringing. Out of those men only 2 men of my lord and 8 men of Elahut escaped" (ARM II 123; after Dalley 1984: 174).

There are several documents which provide some information about the plundering of caravans in this period. Some information may be gleaned from

the Old Babylonian letters, of which the following is an example: "When they established the camp in GN, the people crossed over and no caravan (*alaktu*) was able to pass by without their armed men coming out and plundering the caravans" (CAD A: 299f.).

The Amarna letters from the 14th century BC give us not only good information about the organisation of caravans but also about raids on them. These letters were sent to the Egyptian kings Amenophis III (1386-1349 BC) and Amenophis IV (1350-1334 BC) by kings of Western Asia such as of Babylonia, Assur and the Hittites, as well as by the local kings of Syria-Palestine (Moran 1992). The protection of travelling caravans between Egypt and Western Asia was guaranteed by local Canaanite kings who are named in the Amarna letters. Of course, these caravans had to pay taxes to these kings in return. It is noteworthy in this connection that the Egyptians built a road between the Delta and Gaza. This road is known as Horus-Road in the Egyptian sources. In the time of the New Kingdom, the Egyptians established dozens of outposts centred upon wells and pools of fresh water along this road (Redford 1992: 204). Thus we find some information about fears for the safety of caravans, especially in consequence of Bedouin attacks in Egyptian sources. In ancient Egypt it was dangerous to send caravans even to the oasis without military escorts (Kessler 1980: 328, 331).

One of the Amarna letters (EA 255, quotations from the Amarna letters in this paper are cited following Moran 1992) tells us how a local ruler (king) who was responsible for the security of the caravans responded in one case. The ruler of Piḫilu (modern Ṭabaqat Faḥl in the Jordan valley), Mut-Baḫlu, the son of Laba'ayu the ruler of Shechem, sent a letter to the Egyptian Pharaoh. In it he wrote: "Let the king, my lord, send a caravan even to Karadaniyaš (Babylon). I will personally conduct it under very heavy guard".

The king of Jerusalem in the Amarna Period, ʿAbdi-Ḫepa, sent a letter to the Egyptian king describing a serious criminal situation and asking him for help. He adds: "May the king, my lord, know (that) I am unable to send a caravan to the king, my lord" (EA 287: 53-59).

The Babylonian Kassite king Burnaburiash sent a letter to the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenophis IV complaining about the fact that his caravan, which was under the leadership of a person called Ṣalmu, had been robbed. He described the act as follows: "{tw}ice has a caravan of Ṣalmu, my messenger whom I sent to you, been robb{ed}. The first one Biriyawaza robb[ed, and] his second caravan Pamaḫu, [a gov]ernor of yours in a vassalage, robbed" (EA 7: 73-82). Biriywaza was the local king of Damascus, and Pamaḫu might have been the Egyptian governor of Canaan. Biriywaza is the same ruler who appears as a protector of cities and caravans in another letter (EA 264). Here it is interesting that the plundering of the caravan had been undertaken by governors and not by Bedouin groups.

In another letter written by the Babylonian king Burnaburiash and sent to the Egyptian King Amenophis IV (EA 8), it is stated that his merchants were in Canaan with his messenger Aḫu-ṭabu. They left this messenger in order to engage in some business activities, and were then attacked in Ḫinnatuna in Canaan. Burnaburiash requested that the Egyptian king (his brother) investigate the matter, and that he put the murderers to death to avenge the blood of his servants. He also offered compensation. Burnaburiash described the situation as follows: "In Ḫinnatuna of Canaan, Šum-Adda, the son of Balumme, and Šutatna, the son of Šaratum of Akka, having sent their men, killed my merchants and took away their money" (EA 8: 8-21). He adds: "Canaan is your country, and [its] kings are your servants… And if you do not put these men to death, they are going to kill again, be it a caravan of mine or your own messengers, and so messengers between us will thereby be cut off" (EA 8: 22-33). We see that the attackers in this case are citizens of the Canaanite city of Akko who were organised by their ruler, and not Bedouin bandits. The site Ḫinnatuna was located in Upper Galilee, near Akko.

One local king, Tagi, wrote: "I tried to assemble a caravan, with my brother in charge, but he barely escaped being killed. He is unable to send my caravan to the king, my lord… So now I try herewith to send my caravan to the king, my lord" (EA 264: 5-10, 20-25). In another message Pu-Baʿlu, mayor of Yurṣa (the location of which is unknown to us), wrote that he had not sent a caravan to the Egyptian king. He states: "I am now preparing a fine caravan for you" (EA 316: 16-25).

The killing of merchants and attacks on caravans seem to have taken place very often in North Syria in this period (Leemans 1975: 86f.). This is evident in the documents and agreements discovered in Ugarit, which were intended to systematise the punishments for attacks and to organise the protection of traders (Klengel 1979: 159). Such documents have been also discovered in Boghazkui (Hattuša), the Hittite capital (Oppenheim 1977: 93). Some of these documents speak about murders and the plundering of goods. The ruler of Carcamish had an agreement with the king of Ugarit concerning such killings in each other's territories. It regulated the punishments for murders, and set terms of compensation. In spite of such agreements, it appears that these acts continued. Ini-Tešub, the ruler of Carcamish, complained about his contracting party, the king of Ugarit, saying that "the king of Ugarit constantly robbed the caravan's merchants" (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 419). It is to be noted that the sources give some information about the killing of royal merchants from Ugarit in the region of Carcamish (Klengel 1979: 159f.). Moreover, we know that the Hittite laws contain paragraphs about punishments for anyone who attacked merchants (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 419).

The end of the 2nd millennium is marked by the rise of several nomadic groups such as the Aramaeans and the Aramaeans-Aḫlamu. Some of them,

such as the Suteans, were already known in the first half of this millennium, and continued to be active later (Heltzer 1981). These groups were an actual plague, not only for the settled areas but also for overland communications and travel. For example, a letter from Mari records how the Suteans organised a group of two thousand persons in order to attack Palmyra and Qatna (ARM V, 23: Klengel 1996: 161). One of the Amarna letters (EA 16: 37-42) sent by the Assyrian king Aššur-uballiṭ to the Egyptian king deals with the delaying of messengers between them. Aššur-uballiṭ said that the Suteans were responsible for the delay, and he would take care of the matter and prosecute these nomads for their actions.

In the second half of the 2nd millennium BC, the Aramaeans settled in the middle of the Euphrates (Zadok 1991). It is worth noting that this region, and the area of Ḫabur, seem to have been the most dangerous areas for caravans. Several attacks on caravans in these places are recorded.

The Hittite king Hattušili III sent a letter to the Babylonian Kassite king, Kadašman-Enlil II (1263-1255 BC), complaining about the unstable situation and about the danger which had been caused by the rapacious attacks of the Aramaean tribes along the route between their two lands (Klengel 1979: 162). A good example of the troubles caused by the Aramaeans is recorded in the annals of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BC). He claims: "I have crossed the Euphrates twenty-eight times, twice in one year, in pursuit of the *Aḫlamû*-Aramaeans" (Grayson 1991: 43).

IV. The Plundering of Caravans in the 1st Millennium BC

The 1st millennium BC is characterised by the use of camel caravans and by the stability and development of the caravan trade system. This trade was associated with the use of the dromedary, "ship of the desert", for transport. Thus, after the domestication of the camel in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC, the people of the Syrian desert, Arabs and Aramaeans, started to use the camel in caravans (Zarins 1992). Camels allowed caravan travellers to cross Arabia from the south to the north, and made trade relations between South Arabia and the Fertile Crescent possible. Using the camel in caravans brought international trade to a high level of development. Oases and water places determined the direction of the trade road. Some of the halting places became major stations and developed into so-called caravan cities (Rostovtzeff 1932). The fact that the camel could carry much greater loads than the donkey had a major impact on the caravan trade. In addition, the use of camel caravans sometimes made it possible to circumvent settled areas and thus not to pay customs.

It is not the task of this paper to study the life of nomads in the ancient Near East (Klengel 1971; Knauf 1992). It should be stressed, however, that

nomadic groups constituted the most dangerous threat to the urban centres of the region. This continued to be the case in the Near East until the 1920s. Bedouin raids were a constant threat to the caravans and a constant source of anxiety, especially in the unsettled areas and along the steppes. Bedouins, who were very numerous and mobile, were always on the move along paths in the desert and steppes. Nomads and camel riders were able to cover great distances in the desert. Some units of the armed forces were permanently on alert to prevent nomadic raids upon the cultivated areas.

Nomadic pastoralists threatened the settled populations of Mesopotamia from both the west and the south, and walls had been built to stop these nomads (Klengel 1971:45-49). Even as early as the end of the 3rd millennium BC, the Amurru Bedouins were a danger to settled areas. The fourth year of the reign of the king Shu-Sin (2036-2028 BC) was called "The Year when the wall of Amurru was built" (Haldar 1971: 56, 61; Klengel 1971: 45f.). It is a wall which was built to protect the settled Sumerian and Akkadian areas from the attacks of nomads. This was done in the last years of the third dynasty of Ur.

The 1st millennium BC was characterised by the threat of Bedouin groups, especially in the Syro-Arabian desert. The most well known of these groups were the Arabs (*Aribi*), the Aramaeans and the Suteans.

The Suteans (Sutū) are one of the best examples of these raiding groups. They appeared as firmly established bandits who attacked caravans, invaded towns and destroyed whole districts (Heltzer 1981: 25; Roux 1966: 176, 218). Assyrian kings noted that they always had to repair damage caused by Aramaeans and Suteans. In the 1st millennium, however, it was the Aramaeans and Arabs who made up the nomadic groups which posed the greatest threat to the urban centres in the Near East (Klengel 1971: 195-202).

The written sources give us some information about their raids on the settled areas and on the caravans. The Assyrians used the term Arabs (*Aribi/ Arubu*) not only to designate the Arabs of the Syrian desert, but also for the nomads in the Zagrus regions (Fuchs 1994: 424). The term nomads was sometimes used at that time as a designation for robbers. The Assyrian king Sargon II (721-705 BC) described the Bedouin tribe of the Ḫamranu as follows: "(They) constantly plundered the Babylonian caravans" (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 422; CAD G: 91). He also said that he had to fight against Aramaean tribesmen who continuously attacked the caravans of Babylon (Saggs 1989: 178). Moreover, Assyrian texts document the killing of merchants (Lanfranchi/Parpola 1990: no. 143).

During the reign of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (668-627 BC), an attack on a caravan was recorded. The Aykabaru son of ʿAmmyataʿ of Massa' attacked a caravan (*alaktu*) on the western border of Babylon. This took place after the caravan had left the land of the Nabayataeans. All the members of the

caravan were murdered, with the exception of one person who escaped and found shelter in a royal city (Ephʿal 1982: 56, 219). It is to be noted that the North Arabian people designated as Nabayataeans (Biblical *Nebaioth* and *nbyt* of the Taymanite inscriptions, cf. Winnett/Reed 1970: 99f.) were not the same people as the later Nabataeans.

There is also another example of caravan raids carried out by Arabs (*Aribi*). It is recorded in a Neo-Assyrian letter as follows: "(Ammiliʾti) the son of Amiri readied himself with 300 she-camels, intending to attack the booty being [tran]sferred from Damascus to Assyria" (Parpola 1987: no. 175: 4-9).

Attacks on caravans in the Neo-Babylonian period are also recorded. In a Neo-Babylonian letter we have an example of such raids undertaken by the Aramaean tribe Bīt-Yakin. It is described as follows: "When the Bīt-Yakin patrol came, they stole four men, five donkeys" (Cole 1996: 64, 4-7).

V. Raided Caravans from South Arabia

Our knowledge about caravan trade in ancient Yemen is obtained from classical authors, Arabic authors and the Old Testament. The Mesopotamian sources are of importance since they might well be the oldest ones (Liverani 1992; Ephʿal 1982). Even so, the South Arabian inscriptions are the prime source for this subject. Apparently, camel caravans transporting frankincense, spices, and precious stones from South Arabia to the world of the Mediterranean were already active at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC.

The longest caravan trade route in the 1st millennium BC seems to have been the trans-Arabia road (Potts 1988) which started in Hadhramaut, went through Arabia and ended at the Mediterranean or in Upper Mesopotamia. This route ran through the South Arabian metropolises of Qanaʾ (Biʾr ʿAlī) and Mayfaʿa Timmaʿ (Naqb al-Hağar), the Hadhramitic capital Shabwa, the Qatabanian capital Timnaʿ and the Sabaean capital Maʾrib. It then continued through the Yemeni Jauf, and via the Minaean metropolises of Yathul (Barāqish) and Qarnaw (Maʿīn) to Nağrān. From Nağrān there is a branch of this route which went eastwards through Qaryat al-Fau to East Arabia. The main route continued northwards through Mecca, via Yathrib (Madina), Khaibar, Dīdān (al-ʿUlā), Ḥegrā (Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ) and Taymāʾ. From Taymāʾ there was a branch which ran eastwards to Mesopotamia. Again, however, the main road continued northwards to Tabūk, then from Ayla (al-ʿAqaba) to Petra, and from there to Damascus or to Gaza. There is also another branch which started in Taymāʾ, ran toward Dūmat al-Ğandal, and then through Wadi Sirḥān to Syria and Upper Mesopotamia. This route was apparently in use in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. Without camel caravans, it would have been impossible to cross this great distance. No available data exists about the use of ass caravans on this road, but this is to be expected.

There is a substantial amount of information about this route, which was known in the Hellenistic and Roman periods as the incense route. The journeys on this route seem to have been well-organised in these periods. This can be seen from the data given by the Classical authors. According to Pliny (XII, 32) this road, which started in Timnaʿ and ended in Gaza, was divided into 65 stages. At the end of every stage there was a caravan station. The route was about 1487½ Roman miles long, and the distance between each station was 23 Roman miles (= c. 34 km.) (Groom 1981: 173).

There is no doubt that a caravan journey across Arabia from the south to Mesopotamia, or to Syria-Palestine, was exceptionally dangerous. In spite of security measures it could be taken for granted that attacks on the caravans would always occur along this route. The following is a good example from the Neo-Assyrian texts. It has been discovered just recently, and it describes the plundering of a Sabaean caravan travelling from South Arabia via Taymāʾ to Mesopotamia. The governor of the Suḫu attacked and plundered the caravan in Ḫindānu, which was located in the area of modern Abu Kamal, and this governor described the act as follows:

"People from Taymāʾ and Sheba, whose abode is far-away, whose messenger did not come to my presence, and who did not advance up to my presence: a caravan of theirs approached to the Martu-Well and the Ḫalatum-well, and went (even) beyond, and entered the city of Ḫindanu. I received the news at noon in Kar-Apladad, I harnessed my yoke, in the night I crossed over the river, and on the next day before noon I reached Azlanu. Three days I remained in Azlanu, and on the third day they arrived. 100 of them I took alive, and 200 of their dromedaries with their loads: purple-wool, 'road'-wool, iron, and alabaster, all of their consignments I took away. A great booty I plundered, I brought it inside Suḫu" (Cavigneaux/Ismail 1990: Text 2, iv 27-38; Liverani 1992: 111f.).

As we can see, this area was extremely dangerous for caravans. Bedouin raids by Arabs (*Aribi*) in the reign of the Assyrian king Sargon II were recorded in the vicinity of the city of Ḫindānu (Ḫinzānu) and of Sippar (Edzard/Ephʿal 1980: 422).

Taymāʾ was one of the most important trade stations in north Arabia. It is mentioned in the cuneiform texts and the Old Testament as a trade centre, and it served as a terminal for several trade routes, also serving as a gateway to Mesopotamia (Edens/Bawden 1989).

We also have some information in South Arabian inscriptions about the plundering of caravans (RES 3022; Müller 1985: 663-65). A Minaean inscription found in the Minaean metropolis Yathul, modern Barāqish, talks about a dedication to the deities ʿAṯtar Ḏu-Qābiḍum, Waddum and Nakraḥum. The inscription was written by Minaean merchants who were involved in international trade with North Arabia, Syria and Egypt, and was set up in gratitude for

the protection of their goods and for the safety of their camel caravans. The attacks, which took place between Maʿin and Ragmat (Nağrān), were carried out by the Sabaeans and the Ḫaulān during a war between the North and South. According to our inscription, this was apparently a war between Maʿin and Saba. The inscription also reports that the dedication was written because the divinities ʿAṯtar Ḏu-Qābiḍum, Waddum and Nakraḥum protected their goods in Egypt during the war between the Mady (Medes) and Egypt. This war resulted in the occupation of Egypt by the Persian king Artaxerxes III Ochus in the year 343 BC (Müller 1985: 665).

VI. Caravan Cities and their Role in Securing Caravans

A.L. Oppenheim draws attention to the importance of Nabataean and Palmyrene inscriptions in studying the caravan trade (Oppenheim 1977: 92). At this time, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, overland trade routes as well as communications and travel were well-organised and their safety was guaranteed (Graf et al.1993).

Since it is not possible to study the functions of all caravan cities in this paper, the following section will provide a brief outline of the roles which Petra and Palmyra played in securing caravans, purely as an example.

The Nabataeans controlled the upper part of the incense trade route and acted as middlemen between Yemen and the Mediterranean. No accurate data can be gleaned from the Nabataean inscriptions, but good information may be found in the writings of Classical authors. Strabo described the Nabataean caravan travelling between the Nabataean port Leuke Kome on the east coast of the Red Sea and Petra as follows: "Camel-traders travel back and forth from Petra to this place in safety and ease, and in such numbers of men and camels that they differ in no respect from an army" (Strabo XVI, 4, 23). The Nabataean caravans travelling between Petra and Gaza are mentioned by Pliny (XII, 32, 63ff.).

The Nabataean state apparently exercised solid control over the caravan routes by virtue of strenuous labour. It actually employed forces to patrol its territory, and in addition to the Nabataeans' wide knowledge of the desert routes, they were also able to supply the passing caravans with provisions. This was made possible through the establishment of sedentary outposts, caravan stations and large trade centres such as Petra and Ḥegrā (Madā'in Ṣāliḥ). The standing Nabataean army, and these caravan stations established alongside the caravan route, guaranteed the security of the caravans (al-Muaikel 1994; Graf et al.1992). The attested military term *strategos* (*'strtg* "commander, high official") in Nabataean inscriptions (DNWSI, 92), which is also known from Palmyra, seems to have been associated with caravan escorts.

The naming of Palmyra (Tadmur) in the cuneiform sources of the first half of the 2nd millenium BC in association with caravan trade is interesting (Klengel 1996). It marks Palmyra already as a caravan station at that time, a role which it continued to play throughout its history.

The Palmyrene inscriptions represent the most important contribution to the study of caravans and caravan trade in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Hillers/Cussini 1996). It should be noted that both the Palmyrene caravan trade and the organisation of their caravans have been studied by several scholars (Rostovtzeff 1932; Will 1992; Drexhage 1982, 1988; Gawlikowski 1994, 1996). More than 35 Palmyrene inscriptions referring to caravans have been discovered. All of these inscriptions are bilingual (Palmyrene Aramaic and Greek). R. Drexhage gathered 41 caravan inscriptions and studied them, but she concentrated only on the Greek version of the inscriptions (Drexhage 1988: 22-60). M. Gawlikowski lists 34 caravan inscriptions and gives some information about their contents (Gawlikowski 1994: 32-f., 1996: 142f.). There is also more information about caravans from other categories of Palmyrene inscriptions such as the Tariff inscription (CIS II 3913; Matthews 1984).

Palmyrene foreign trade was well organised. Commercial agents, agencies, commercial offices or "funduqs", and caravanserais for Palmyrene merchants were established in several places such as Koptos in Upper Egypt and Charax (Drexhage 1988: 61-86). The guarding of caravan traffic and the protection of caravans travelling between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean seems to have been the main function of Palmyra. At that time, as always, ensuring the security of caravans caused the caravan trade the most anxiety. Thus, the most important contribution of Palmyra to the stability of the caravan traffic was the escorting of caravans through the desert.

Several Palmyrene inscriptions mention not only the members of a caravan (*bny šyrtʾ*), but also its leader (*rb šyrtʾ*, *rš/rʾš šyrtʾ*). These inscriptions also provide good data about the support of the Palmyrene people for merchants and caravans. Some scholars maintain that Palmyra was a more developed "caravan" city than all the others (Gawlikowski 1994), and it is described by M. Rostovtzeff in his *Caravan Cities* as the most typical caravan city in antiquity. It had all the typical characteristics of a caravan station, and it provided all the services such as rest, water and the like, which were needed.

We do not have concrete information about the size of a Palmyrene caravan. We do know, however, that these caravans were sometimes organised by one rich merchant (Drexhage 1988: 42), by more than one person at other times, and that a big caravan was occasionally supported and organised by the city of Palmyra itself. Sometimes specific individuals were honoured as leaders of caravans (Drexhage 1988: 95). These leaders most certainly belonged to the Palmyrene rich or had been the sheikhs of tribes involved in caravan trade (Drexhage 1988:

90-100). However, there are some leaders who were chosen to head or lead a caravan solely on the basis of their ability (Drexhage 1988: 96). These people or leaders do not bear titles in the inscriptions, and are mentioned simply as being leaders without further data about their social backgrounds.

Two persons played an important role in the organisation of the Palmyrene caravans. These are the *archemporos*, that is, the leader of the merchants, and the *synodiarch*, the leader of the caravan, who is sometimes described in the Palmyrene inscriptions as *qm bršhwn*, "he stood at their head" (DNWSI, 1043). There is no accurate data in the Palmyrene Aramaic about the Greek terms *archemporos* and *synodiarch*, since an Aramaic equivalent is rarely mentioned. Sometimes these terms appear in Palmyrene Aramaic as *rb šyrt'*, "leader of the caravan". Apparently these two terms were used to designate a caravan leader (Gawlikowski 1988: 31; Drexhage 1988: 94). It also seems that the individuals who were regularly thanked in the inscriptions "for everything that they have done for the merchants" were leaders of these caravans in spite of the fact that this explicit title is absent from the inscriptions. At any rate, it is clear that caravan leaders in Palmyra were responsible for everything regarding the caravans, including their security.

The Palmyrene caravans travelling between Charax and Palmyra were protected both by outposts and by a number of members of the armed forces. Security measures for the safety of caravans were taken into account in the context of the general organisation of the caravan. There was a Palmyrene army which was responsible for protecting the caravans. It was made up primarily of cavalry soldiers, that is, riders of horses and camels. Armed private escorts were also organised (Drexhage 1988: 105-119). The fact that the Roman army occasionally participated in taking care of the security of the caravans is evidenced by Palmyrene inscriptions which honoured legions of the Roman army (Drexhage 1988: 26).

Only a small number of Palmyrene inscriptions directly mention attacks on caravans. We do have some information about the organisation of caravans in Palmyra, however, from honorific inscriptions which suggest that the protection of caravans was taken very seriously. Some of these inscriptions refer to military measures designed to fend of Bedouin attacks on caravans (Drexhage 1988: 34, 52f.). These actions seem to have been organised by people with the military title of *strategos*.

The return of caravans to Palmyra, or their arrival at an outpost, was a huge and joyous event, and was always used as an opportunity to honour the caravan leaders and their protectors in gratitude for their safe arrival (Drexhage 1988: 88). Several honorary inscriptions from Palmyra document how merchants (*tgry'*) and members of a caravan (*bny šyrt'*) were thankful for their safety and for the protection of their caravans. In general, those honoured were the leaders of the caravans (*rb šyrt'*, *r'š šyrt'*).

The inscriptions constantly mention people who accompanied the caravans and brought them back safely. These were the protectors of caravans, who included the leaders. One of these protectors was Suʿādu son of Bolyadʿ son of Suʿādu. More than 17 statues dated between 132 and 147 AD were erected in his honour in Palmyra, Vologesias, Charax and even in the desert, among other places. They were erected in honour of his contribution to the caravans, and especially to their safety, as the inscriptions which are engraved on these declare (Drexhage 1988: 101; Gawlikowski 1994: 29).

In another inscription found in the Baʿal Shamin temple at Palmyra, Suʿādu son of Bolyadʿ was honoured by the members of the caravan because "He helped the caravan which recently arrived from Vologesias with everything and rescued it from great danger that surrounded it" (Teixidor 1979: 36-39).

In additions to seeing to the security of caravans by means of its armed escorts, Palmyra also signed friendly treaties with nomadic tribes. Nomadic tribes constituted the greatest threat to caravans, and Palmyra had to take suitable measures against them. This is documented, for instance, in a bilingual (Greek-Aramaic) Palmyrene inscription. In this unpublished inscription, which was discovered in the Allāt temple in Palmyra and dates back to the year 144 AD, an attack on "a caravan of all Palmyrenes" is recorded. A band of robbers led by ʿAbdallāt (from the tribe of) Aḥitaya raided this caravan, which was on the way back from Vologesias. No specific place is mentioned. Suʿādu son of Bolyadaʿ, who defeated the robbers using military power and saved the caravan, was honoured with four statues in four sanctuaries in Palmyra (Gawlikowski 1994: no. 15; Drexhage 1988: 111).

Other nomadic attacks are recorded as having been defeated by ʿUgailu son of Maqqai son of ʿUgailu. Under his leadership as *strategos*, he saved traders and caravans several times. In recognition of all of his heroic acts, the counsel of Palmyra ordered the four tribes to honour him with four statues (Gawlikowski 1994: no. 29).

Several inscriptions mention individuals and traders, as well as leaders of caravans, who were honoured not only because they brought the caravans back safely, sometimes gratis, but also because they financed them from their own pockets. The following are some examples of this:

"This statue is that of Taim-Raṣu, son of Taimā, son of Muqīmu, son of Garbā, leader of the caravan, which has been set up to him by the members of the caravan who moved up with him from Karak (Charax), because he rescued (their) expenses for them, three hundred denarii of gold, ancient currency, and he was favourable to them" (CIS II, 3948). Another example shows how the chief of the caravan was honoured because "he brought the caravan up gratis, at his own expense" (CIS II, 3936).

Marcus Ulpius Yarḥai was honoured several times by the members of a caravan because he financed it (Drexhage 1988: 42-49). This man seems to have

been an important figure in the organisation, finance and protection of Palmyrene caravans travelling between Palmyra and Spasinu Charax on the Arabian Gulf. As an agent, he also played an important role in Palmyrene maritime trade.

The Arabian military frontiers, which had been established by the Roman emperor Trajan (98-117 AD) in the form of military camps and castellos, primarily defended and protected the Provincia Arabia, but they also functioned to make the caravan routes secure (Rostovtzeff 1932: 33; Bowersock 1994: 93ff.).

VII. The Plundering of Caravans in Pre-Islamic Arabia according to Arabic Sources

We also have data from the Arabic sources which shows that Arabs attacked and plundered Persian caravans. Arabs of al-Ḥīra used to monopolise the escort of the Persian caravans to Arabia. However, caravans of an-Nuʿmān, the king of al-Ḥīra, were also plundered by some Arab tribes (Crone 1987: 147). There is another example from the early Islamic period. According to Arabic sources, on several occasions the Prophet Muḥammed attacked the caravans of Mecca which travelled between Syria and Mecca (Crone 1987: 117, 165). Although these were actually military actions of Moslems in their struggle with Mecca, it shows how a caravan could become a target of attacks in a time of war.

VIII. Plundered Articles from the Caravans

It may also be of interest to ascertain which objects were plundered from caravans. Unfortunately, the goods themselves are not always mentioned. It is sometimes possible to guess, and some documents do report objects or merchandise which were stolen. For example, the merchants' money was seized from a Babylonian caravan attacked near Akko. The goods plundered from the Sabaean caravan which was mentioned earlier, namely "purple-wool", "road"-wool, iron, and alabaster, are important references in the context of the history of the trade of South Arabia with Mesopotamia. In the ancient Near East, South Arabia was famous for its frankincense, myrrh and precious stones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence presented here shows that the attacks and raids on caravans in the pre-Islamic Near East in general, and in the ancient Near

East in particular, were not carried out only by Bedouin bandits. They were also organised and undertaken by governors of cities and districts. The most dangerous routes ran through unsettled areas and the desert.

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